



Election Reform

Background

Washington's 2004 election for governor was not only the closest governor's race in our state's history, it was the closest governor's race in our nation's history. After the initial count, a machine recount and a hand recount, the final margin of victory for Christine Gregoire was a scant 0.004 percent. Washington citizens of all political stripes recognized there were inconsistencies in vote-counting procedures across county lines, confusion among poll workers about provisional ballots, and concern about the voting rights of men and women serving in the military.

Solutions

Democrats' number one election reform priority is to increase voter confidence in the legitimacy of the process. Senate Democrats crafted a slate of election reform bills covering a wide range of issues. At their core, these measures are designed to encourage voter confidence and participation in our election process. The bills will provide greater consistency of election rules in every county in the state. They will increase ballot security without erecting new barriers that could turn away legitimate voters.

Session Victories

Omnibus Elections Reform Bill – Senate Bill 5499

The Legislature passed an omnibus election reform bill that protects the rights of law-abiding voters and restores trust in our election system. The measure includes the following provisions:

- All poll-site voters will have to show a photo ID, voter registration card, utility bill or government document to establish their identity. The secretary of state will establish rules governing what documents are acceptable.
- New statewide signature verification standards for absentee ballots will be developed by the secretary of state in consultation with law enforcement.
- Voters whose ballot signatures do not match the county's records will be informed by the county and sent a new registration form to confirm the signature.
- A voter database, available by January 2006, will provide county auditors with a central list of eligible voters. The list will be consistently updated with the names of deceased persons and convicted felons.

- Provisional and absentee ballots will not be capable of being counted in poll-site tabulating machines.
- The certification period will be lengthened to 21 days, allowing more time for the return of military ballots.
- Ballots will no longer be “enhanced” when machines cannot read them, but a duplicate ballot would be created so the ballots can be counted. An audit trail will link the duplicated ballot to the original, unchanged ballot.
- At certification, county auditors will have to immediately reconcile all votes cast with the number of voters credited.
- Voting twice or destroying voter registrations will be felony offenses.

All-absentee elections – Senate Bill 5744, House Bill 1754

Washington’s counties, which administer the state’s polling sites and pay the majority of the cost for elections, would save considerable money by conducting all-mail elections. With fewer voters headed to the polls on Election Day, counties are facing higher costs per voter to keep multiple polling sites open. Absentee voting has encouraged wider participation, something Democrats have long supported. All-mail voting is currently allowed in certain special elections and in precincts with fewer than 200 voters. The bill would allow counties to retain a central polling place or ballot drop so that voters who enjoy the civic pride of going to the polls could still have that patriotic experience. This bill passed both chambers of the Legislature.

Voter registration reform – Senate Bill 5743

The Senate approved legislation to scrub the voter rolls to ensure that felons, the deceased and non-citizens are not voting in our elections. Counties could compare their voter lists against lists of felons, the deceased and federal immigration rolls. The secretary of state will conduct quarterly reviews of voter registrations to ensure that those not entitled to vote are removed from the rolls. This bill passed both chambers of the Legislature.

Paper trail on electronic machines – Senate Bill 5395

Electronic voting machines, currently used in two counties, will be required to have a voter-verifiable paper trail. These machines will be randomly audited against the paper trail to ensure the equipment is functioning without error. The new paper trail would be used during a manual recount. This bill passed both chambers of the Legislature.

Military and other out-of-state voters – Senate Bill 5565

Military voters have many options to ensure they can cast a ballot in the general election. Unfortunately, too many service men and women (and other out-of-state voters) don’t know

about these many options. This bill requires the secretary of state to send these voters information to alert them that: return postage on military ballots is free; the date written by the voter on the return envelope is considered the date of mailing; the envelope must be signed by election day; military voters do not need to pre-register; faxed ballots are allowed; and e-mailed ballots are available. This bill passed both chambers of the Legislature.

Changing the primary date – Senate Bill 5219, House Bill 2027

Our current primary election is held on the third Tuesday in September, only six weeks from the general election. The current elections calendar gives the counties very little time to mail out ballots and voters' pamphlets. Members of the military have experienced delays in receiving their ballots, and this proposal allows more time for ballots to reach bases overseas. County auditors have also worried about the length of time needed to conduct a manual recount in a primary election. A bill to move the primary back to the third Tuesday in August was approved by the House, but failed to pass out of the Senate.